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NOTES

ON A COPY OF

DR. WM. DOUGLASS'S ALMANACK
FOR 1743,

TOUCHING ON

THE SUBJECT OF MEDICINE IN MASSACHUSETTS
BEFORE HIS TIME.

BY

SAMUEL ABBOTT GREEN, M.D.

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1691²-1752

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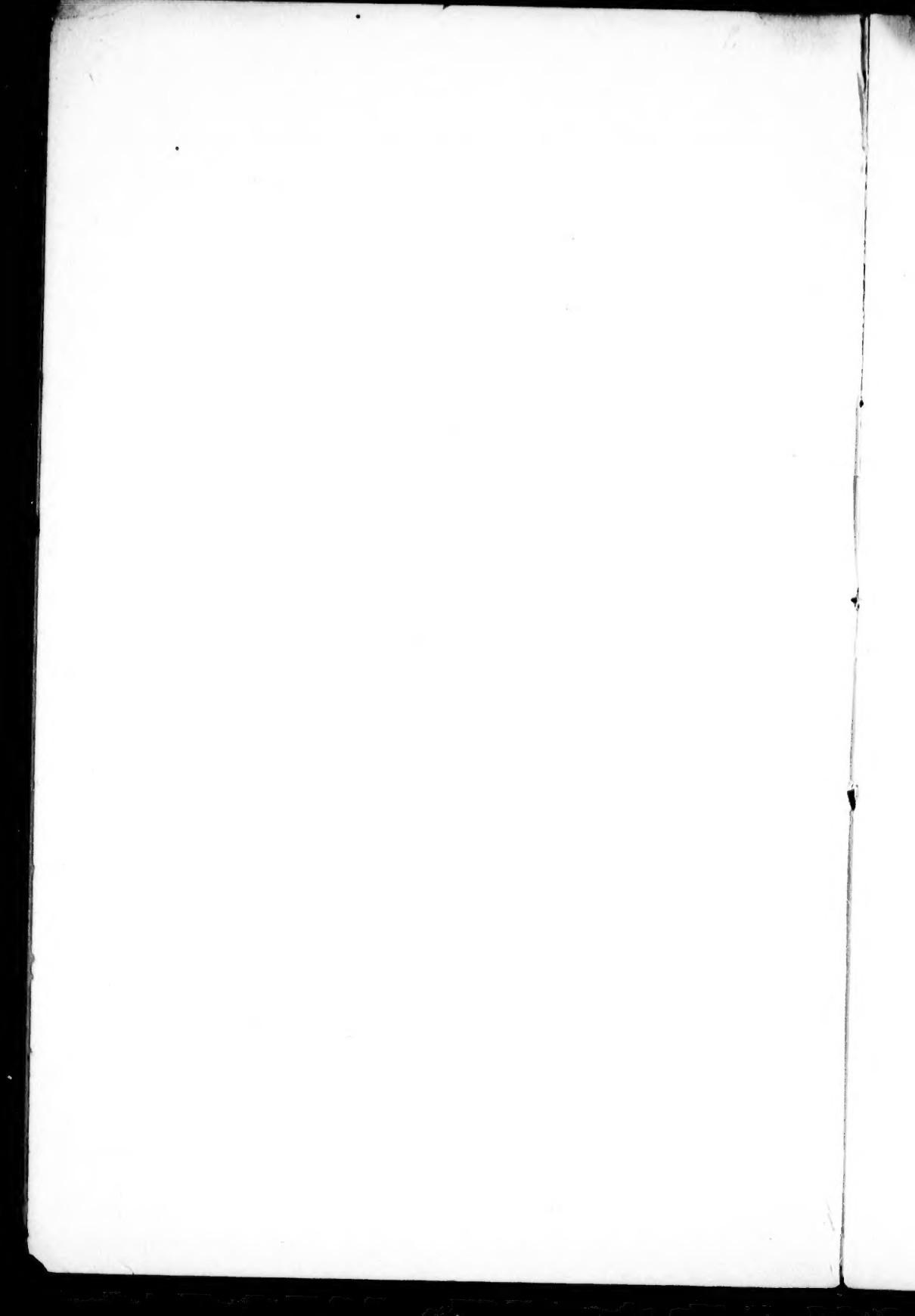
THE SUBJECT OF MEDICINE IN MASSACHUSETTS
BEFORE HIS TIME.

BY

SAMUEL ABBOTT GREEN, M.D. 1830-1884

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DR. WM. DOUGLASS'S ALMANACK.

AT a meeting of the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY held on Thursday, Feb. 14, 1884, Dr. SAMUEL A. GREEN, in presenting a copy of William Nadir's Almanack for the year 1743, spoke as follows :—

This almanac has been in the possession of my family for several generations, and it is only recently that I have been enabled to identify the handwriting and establish beyond doubt the name of the original owner. The following entry is made among the notes, under date of March 2 :—

"Peter Faneuil Esq^r dyed of a complication of diseases, a very fat squat man, & has bin Exceeding charitable amongst us, and a great Loss in this Tow^w."

Again, under date of March 10 :—

"M^r Peter Faneuil Esq^r burried a very Large funeral went roūd y^e Town house gaue us gloues at y^e funeral but sent y^e gloues on y^e 11. day. his Coffin couer[d] wth black velvet, & plated wth y^e llow plates."

In the first volume (page 73) of the Proceedings, it is recorded that the gift of "A MS. Journal of a Gentleman in Boston, from the year 1729 to the year 1749, from Mr. Joshua Green," was made to this Society on July 29, 1794. The person presenting it was my great-grandfather; and with the laudable curiosity of a dutiful descendant I set about an examination of the manuscript, which consisted of three folio volumes made up mostly of items about the weather. There are entries here and there of some interest, but generally they are of a meteorological character. All the internal evidence goes to show that the Journal was kept by Benjamin

Walker, Jr.; and not only is the handwriting identical with that in the almanac, but often the expressions are very similar, leaving no doubt that it was Walker who made the marginal notes. He refers as follows to the benefactor of the town of Boston, and mentions a physical peculiarity not generally known: —

“ Thursday 3. [March, 1743.] Peter Faneuil Esq^r between 2 & 3 a clock in y^e afternoon dyed of a dropsical complyca, he was a fat squat Lame [man,] hip short went with high heeld shoe (In my opinion a great loss too This Town aged 42. 8 m) & I think by what I haue hear'd has done more Charitable deeds than any man y^t euer liv'd in this Town & for whom I am very sorry.

“ March 10. Peter Faneuil Esq^r burried. Bearers Mess^{rs} Tom Lechmere Josh. Winslow Jn^o Wheelwright And. Oliuer Jn^o Gooch Jn^o Wendall went round y^e Town house

“ Thursda 10. Burried Peter Faneuil Esq^r in 43^d year of age a fatt corpulen brown squat man hip short lame frō childhood.”

Benjamin Walker, Jr., the writer of this Journal, was the son of Benjamin and Palsgrave Walker, and born in Boston on Jan. 24, 1679-80. He was a shopkeeper, and associated in business with his younger brother John. His family is mentioned in Sewall's Diary (vol. iii. pp. 371, 372); and additional facts concerning it are given in “The New England Historical and Genealogical Register” (vol. xv. pp. 53, 54). I have but little doubt that he was a kinsman of Isaac Walker, the partner of my great-great-grandfather, Joshua Green, and that these papers came through this mercantile connection. Their firm were extensive owners in a tract of land, known as “the Green and Walker grant,” and comprising a large part of the present towns of Heath and Rowe, in Franklin County of this State.* The sons of these partners, Joshua Green, Jr., and Edward Walker, after the dissolution of their fathers' firm by death, kept up the same business, under the same style of Green and Walker; and this fact undoubtedly explains the drift of the Journal and this little pamphlet.

The almanac bears on the title-page the name of William Nadir as the author, and to it are appended the mysterious letters L. X. Q. It is well known that this name was the pseudonym of Dr. William Douglass, a Scotchman by birth, who came to Boston in the early days of his professional career. He had received his medical instruction in Paris and Leyden, and was a man of good education and many accomplishments,

* Holland's History of Western Massachusetts, vol. ii. pp. 382, 419.

though of a peculiar disposition that kept him continually in controversy. It was wittily said of him once that he was always positive and sometimes accurate. He was well versed in the natural sciences, and much interested in astronomy. Dr. Douglass opposed strenuously, both by tongue and pen, the introduction of small-pox inoculation, though he lived to modify his views on this subject. He took up his abode at Boston in the year 1718, at which time he was the only physician here who had received the Doctorate of Medicine.

He writes, under date of Feb. 20, 1720-21, to his compatriot, Dr. Cadwallader Colden, who had settled at New York, also in the year 1718:—

“ You complain of the practice of Physick being undervalued in your parts and with reason; we are not much better in that respect in this place; we abound with Practitioners, though no other graduate than myself, we have fourteen Apothecary shops in Boston; all our Practitioners dispense their own medicines.” *

Dr. Douglass appears to have been fairly successful as a physician, and in a little more than two years after the date of this letter he was the owner of a large tract of land in Worcester County, which is now included within the limits of Douglas,—a town named after him, though the final *s* is dropped. In the year 1735 he was one of a small number of persons who formed a medical society in Boston, the first association of the kind in the country.

In a letter written by him to the assessors of the town of Boston, and dated April 23, 1747, he says:—

“ Further I may observe to you that I am or Soon must be in the Decline of Human life; therefore do not endeavor to increase my Fortune, having no family to provide for: but shall yearly lessen it, by doing charities in my life time by donations and bounties.” †

I have been thus explicit with Dr. Douglass’s affairs in order to show that it is not improbable that he was the “certain gentleman of the town of Boston,” alluded to in the printed Journal of the House of Representatives, July 7, 1739, and about whom a query was raised by our Corresponding Member, Mr. Moore, of New York, in a letter to the President of this Society,‡ written two years ago.

* 4 Mass. Hist. Coll., vol. ii. p. 164.

† The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, vol. civ. p. 538: June 8, 1881.

‡ Proceedings, vol. xix, p. 250.

The entry in the Journal is as follows :—

"Information being given to the House by the Member from Worcester, that a certain Gentleman of the Town of Boston, [was] well disposed for the Encouragement and Support of a Professor of Physick within this Province, and for that good Purpose would chearfully contribute out of his own Estate a considerable Sum of Money, provided this Court will join therein in making a Grant of Lands, or otherwise establish a good Fund for the valuable Ends aforesaid ; and the same being considered ;

"Ordered, That the members of Boston, Charlestown, Roxbury, and Chelsea be a Committee to treat with the Gentleman, hear him on his Proposals, and report their Opinion of what may be proper to be done for the encouragement of so good a Scheme."

The member from Worcester who brought the subject before the House was Colonel John Chandler, and as Dr. Douglass was a large land-owner in Worcester County it is not unlikely that Colonel Chandler knew him personally. This fact, I am aware, has but little weight, but I mention it for what it is worth ; and in the absence of positive testimony it would seem as probable as not, that Dr. Douglass was the "certain gentleman of the town of Boston," who offered to endow a medical professorship at that time. The offer, however, does not seem to have been accepted, as no further trace of it is found in the proceedings of the House, or elsewhere. This attempt is by no means the earliest one in Massachusetts to promote medical education, as Mr. Moore supposes. Nearly a century before this time Giles Firmin, a man learned in medicine, had given instruction in this branch of science. The apostle Eliot, under date of Sept. 24, 1647, writes to Mr. Shepard, the minister of Cambridge, and expresses the desire that —

"Our young Students in Physick may be trained up better than yet they bee, who have onely theoreticall knowledge, and are forced to fall to practise before ever they saw an Anatomy made, or dulye trained up in making experiments, for we never had but one Anatomy in the Countrey, which Mr. *Giles Firman* (now in England) did make and read upon very well, but no more of that now."*

An anatomy is the old name for a skeleton ; and Mr. Firmin may be considered, in point of time, the first medical lecturer in the country. His instruction, doubtless, was crude, and comprised little more than informal talks about the dry bones before him ; but even this was a great help to the learners. At any rate, it seems to have excited an interest in the subject ; for

* 3 Mass. Hist. Coll., vol. iv. p. 57

the recommendation is made at the session of the General Court, beginning Oct. 27, 1647, a few weeks later than the date of Eliot's letter, that—

"We conceive it very necessary y^t such as studies physick, or chirurgery may have liberty to reade anatomy & to anotomize once in foure yeare some malefacto^r in case there be such as the Courte shall allow of." *

Edward Johnson, in his "Wonder-Working Providence" (London, 1654), written about the year 1650, describes Harvard College at a period near that time, and says that "some help hath been had from hence in the study of Physick" (page 165). It is very likely that Cambridge was the place where Giles Firmin had "read upon" or lectured on his skeleton.

Even much earlier than this, at the very planting of the Colony, attention had been given to the need of physicians and the importance of medical knowledge. In the first general letter of instruction to Governor Endicott and his Council, from the Governor and Deputy of the New England Company, dated Gravesend, April 17, 1629, it is written,—

"Wee haue entertained Lambert Wilson, Chirurgion to remaine [with] yo^u in the service of the planta^çon, wth whom wee are agreed that hee shall serve this Companie and the other Planters that li[ve] in the Planta^çon for 3 yeares, and in that tyme, apply himself to cure but also for the Indians, as from tyme to ty[me] hee shalbe directed not only of such as came from hence for the geⁿall an[d] pticular accompts by yo^{selfe} o^f yo^r successo^r & the rest of the Councell; And moreover hee is to educate & instruct in his Art one or more youths, such as yo^u and the said Councell shal[1] appoint that may bee helpfull to him and if occasion serve succeed him in the Planta^çon, wth youth or youths fitt to learn that pfession lett bee placed wth him, of wth Mr Hugessons Sonne if his father approue therof may bee one, the rather because hee h[ath] bin trayned vp in litterature, but if not hee then such other as yo^u shall iudg most fittest &c." †

Here we have the germs of a medical school, which, to be sure, did not fructify at once. But who shall say that they were not fostered and kept alive during this long series of years, in a regular line of descent, under the various and varying fortunes of the Colony and Province, and finally developed into the noble institution known to-day as the Harvard Medical School? Whatever other responsibilities may

* General Court Records, vol. ii. p. 175.

† Suffolk Deeds, lib. i. p. xii.

rest upon the shoulders of the founders of Massachusetts, or whatever other faults may be charged to their account, it cannot be said that they were unmindful, in theory at least, of the liberal benefits that accrue from the school of rational medicine.

